

Preface



This book is an exercise in comparative theology, one that engages in conversation with the Hindu tradition of Advaita Vedanta and, in particular, with its eighth-century master teacher, Sankara. Sankara's thought is treated herein not merely as an object of historical curiosity; rather, he is engaged as a vital resource and conversation partner, one who has much to offer to contemporary Christian theology.

But why should Christian theology engage other theological traditions in conversation? Is it not, after all, the confessional work of a particular faith family? As such, it hardly seems obvious to suppose that Christian theologians ought to engage theologians from other religious traditions. Moreover, the practical demands of comparative theology seem daunting, even forbidding. The burden of bringing scripture and tradition to bear on the problems and challenges of our time seems vast enough without committing oneself also to the work of learning the languages, insights, and commitments of other religious traditions.

Without launching into an extended methodological discussion about the relationship between Christian theology in general and comparative theology in particular, let me suggest that comparative theology can be understood as motivated by two ancient biblical imperatives: the injunction prohibiting false witness against our neighbors and the deeper injunction actually to love our neighbors.

In our time, no theological claim can be regarded as the private speech of the Christian community alone. Even when we speak among ourselves, we speak in the hearing of others. When we speak about God, we are heard and overheard by a great cloud of witnesses, a cloud that includes persons of faith who are not part of the Christian community. The content of our

speech follows a trajectory and takes on meanings that we cannot control. Every theological claim, every statement that has a thematic content that goes beyond the jubilant shout of praise or yearning whisper of prayer, becomes a part of public conversation. Each affirmation we advance intersects in complex ways with the creeds and convictions of persons from other religious communities.

The publicity of such entangling theological speech brings with it the risk of “bearing false witness.” Insofar as our affirmations either implicitly or explicitly challenge or even negate the convictions of others, we run the risk of misunderstanding and mischaracterizing them. These risks are not incurred by theologians alone; even (or perhaps especially) editorial cartoonists know well how deeply public and global all our speech acts are.

Feeling the gravity of our fraught communicative situation should not lead us to silence, nor does it mean that we cannot disagree with our religious neighbors. Indeed, to contextualize and historicize our neighbors, to understand the content of their speech but to fail to engage the truth-value of that speech, risks condescension. Even vigorous disagreement is more respectful than intellectual inquiry that treats other people and their religious ideas always and only as objects of our study but never as subjects who can talk back.

Comparative theology is conversational theology. Such theology goes beyond taking an inventory of other people’s convictions for the sake of specifically Western intellectual projects like comparative religion and ethnography. Comparative theology takes the content of other people’s ideas seriously, seriously enough to challenge those ideas and seriously enough to be changed by those ideas. Comparative theology, as a work of Christian faith, strives mightily to avoid bearing false witness against our neighbors. We do this by entering into dialogue with them in a common inquiry about ultimate matters.

In the course of such conversation, our initial and somewhat minimal motivation to avoid misrepresenting our religious neighbors is caught up in a deeper movement of the Spirit. In the space between my neighbor and me, something like affection, respect, and admiration begins to grow. If by grace what transpires amounts genuinely to love, we will soon find that we cannot authentically claim to love our neighbors *despite* their deepest convictions. We will find it difficult to bypass the central experiences, practices, and insights that animate and sustain persons of other faiths. Should we embrace the calling to love our neighbors, we will find ourselves vulnerable to what is healing and life-giving in their religious traditions.

Comparative theology emerges out of such vulnerability. It seeks to think through what we have learned from other religious traditions even as we strive

to keep faith with our prior convictions. It is risky work, a labor of mind and heart that will require us to rethink our own convictions. Finally, comparative theology is an ethical enterprise. It is a project that is undertaken *with* people of other faith even when that engagement occurs primarily by way of a close and patient reading of their religious texts. Comparative theology undertaken in this spirit might lead theologians into the relatively uncharted waters of multiple religious participation. Comparative theologians run the risk of becoming hyphenated, of becoming Hindu-Christians or Buddhist-Christians.

Given the enormous demands of comparative theology, I have tried to make this book as user-friendly as possible. I have deliberately kept scholarly apparatus at a minimum, and I have largely omitted reference to contemporary movements in philosophy and theology with which I am in conversation. I have also eliminated diacritical marks for Sanskrit terms; specialists will not need them and generalists do not want them. The focus remains resolutely on reading Sankara and Paul Tillich together and exploring the promise of that conversation for the future of theology.

I use the notion of the human predicament as my central comparative category. Over the years, I have had the pleasure of teaching a course entitled, “The Human Predicament: What’s Wrong with Us and How to Fix It.” (I confess that I stole the subtitle for my course from John Silber’s book *Straight Shooting: What’s Wrong with America and How to Fix It*. Silber was chancellor of Boston University during my student days there.)

The thesis of that course is that a number of the world’s religious traditions can be analyzed by appeal to a medical model. I argue that many of the world’s religious traditions offer a diagnosis for the human predicament, provide an etiology for that predicament, propose a prognosis, and then prescribe a course of treatment. I urged my undergraduates to employ this medical model to read sacred texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Tao Te Ching*. My students and I discovered that we could ask the most precise and intriguing questions about how traditions, texts, and thinkers might be compared. We could ask if two religious texts (within or without a given religious tradition) agreed in their diagnoses of the human predicament but disagreed on the question of etiology. We could then ask whether their differing etiological analyses meant that each would offer a different prognosis for the human predicament and hence different therapies. The range of permutations and the precision allowed by these questions far exceeded somewhat standard queries about whether the world’s religions were really paths up the same mountain or whether they were planets orbiting around

the same sun and the like. There was also an added pedagogical bonus: My students intuitively understood and grasped the significance of these questions and enjoyed the process. Best of all, I did not have to labor to demonstrate that the comparative work we were doing was important.

This book employs the medical model for East-West conversation. More specifically, I use the medical model to understand better the similarities and differences between Christian ecstasy and Hindu nonduality. Conventional wisdom among both theologians and interested nontheologians affirms that the Christian West is enamored of transcendence while the Hindu East is entranced by immanence. I argue instead that this stereotype misses the mark. At stake instead are rival conceptions of immanence. In the Christian West, and in particular in the theology of Paul Tillich, immanence takes the form of ecstasy. The presence of God is felt most intimately when we are grasped by the Holy Spirit and when that Spirit prays in us even when we know not how to pray. In ecstasy, we are taken into the divine life and reunited with divinity. In the Hindu East, and more specifically within the Advaita Vedanta tradition, the ultimate truth is that the human being just *is* Brahman. There is no question of being *reunited with* Brahman because human beings are *never separated* from Brahman. In this book, I seek to determine whether we might critically appropriate insights from both of these ways of imagining the immanent divine and then come to understand how these insights bear upon the human predicament. To that conversation, I invite my readers.